

Why is effective feedback so critical in teaching and learning?

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Abstract

Teaching in the 21st century has begun to shift from a pedagogy which views the teacher as the bearer of all knowledge to an approach that values ako, reciprocal learning. Both formative and summative assessments are influential in teaching but it is how we use the knowledge gained that is important. Literature surrounding effective feedback points to benefits for both the learner and teacher. Feedback is where the future learning begins and without it, assessment purely states where children are at in a point in time. Analysis of the assessment helps inform the required feedback and therefore the learning steps for the students to achieve their goals. While feedback is not strictly assessment, it is the essential element in turning assessment into a tool for future learning. This literature review will be focusing on what constitutes effective feedback and why it is so critical in teaching and learning.

Keywords: *effective feedback, teaching and learning, reflection, student success, reciprocal learning*



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Assessment for teaching and learning

Assessment in education is primarily conducted to provide Assessment in New Zealand education is primarily conducted to provide information to improve students' learning and teachers' teaching (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2007). When used effectively assessment can; promote student learning, raise standards, reduce disparities of achievement and improve the quality of the programmes provided (MOE, 2007). The literature suggests that formative assessment can be defined as, assisting learners to develop learning skills to become lifelong learners. Feedback is a tool used in this process which helps students to make meaning of their learning journey. Improving learning through assessment requires five factors: providing effective feedback, students' active involvement, adjusting teaching in view of assessment outcomes, recognising the influence of assessment on students' motivation and self-esteem- both crucial influences on learning and, ensuring pupils assess themselves and understand how to improve (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004).

While assessment is often referred to in relation to summative assessment, if implemented effectively, literature suggests that feedback, with an emphasis on assessment for learning, can positively affect teaching and learning. The New Zealand Curriculum's (NZC) (MOE, 2007) aim is to create; "confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners", and this review

of literature helps to inform of the importance of feedback for teaching and learning, and creating individuals as envisaged by the NZC in New Zealand during the 21st century.

This review addresses: what constitutes effective feedback, the impacts of effective feedback on teaching and learning in relation to improving success and achievement, creating responsive learners and enhancing teachers' teaching. The differences found within the literature are also discussed.

What is effective feedback?

The word assess is derived from the Latin verb 'assidere', meaning 'to sit with'. This infers that assessment is something which we do with and for students rather than do to them (Green as cited in Knight, 2000). Feedback is a pedagogical framework of assessment, for learning not of learning (Black et al., 2004), that promotes students engagement and learning (Black & William, 2009). Effective feedback is described by the Ministry of Education, (n.d) as: specific, descriptive, student initiated (combined with self/ peer assessment), time appropriate, suited to needs of individuals, provides strategies for improvement, allows time for action, happens as a conversation and communication surrounding the adequacy of the feedback provided (MOE, n.d). While written feedback can be effective, issues can arise due to language, extent of content and the inclusion of grades. Hattie & Temperley (as cited in Lipnevich,

McCallen, Miles & Smith, 2013), Black et al. (2004) and Crooks (as cited in Knight, 2000), all identify that if feedback is presented alongside a grade, the benefits which the feedback provided can be reduced. If the grade is omitted, it supports the learner and parents to focus on the learning rather than interpretation of the grade (Black et al., 2004). As teachers it is important to reflect on practices in the classroom and how these affect students.

Carrington & MacArthur (2012) emphasize the important role of reflection as a key catalyst for change. Effective feedback is important for teaching and learning and the current literature supports this suggesting that it is; necessary for improvement and learning, influential in creating learners responsive to their learning and important in enhancing teachers' teaching. The responsibility for learning is in the hands of the teacher and the learner and therefore they both must act to have the best outcomes for learning (Black & William, 2004).

Bridging the Gap

The literature reviewed points to effective feedback influencing improvement and success for students. Feedback identifies for the student the gap between their level of performance and their desired level (Shute, 2008), scaffolding the learning (Alton-Lee, 2003). Ramaprasad (as cited in Black & William, 2009) and Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2009) suggest that the key processes that underpin teaching and learning: establishing where the learners are in their learning (their current state of learning) where they are going (their goal) and what needs to be done to get them there are considered. When students are appropriately informed about their progress they are able to identify their next steps for learning (Education Review Office, 2012). Black et al. (2004) and Knight (2000) suggest that when learning is seen as a competition, as is implied when grades are given, the effort invested is reduced in comparison to written feedback without grades. This is especially relevant to low achievers as they relate their low achievement to lack of ability resulting in a minimised belief that they can achieve (Black et al., 2004). If teachers focus on reinforcing the view that feedback will help students to learn rather than dictate how smart they are, it enables students to learn more (Black et al., 2004). Teachers are there to support students not to criticize them (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2009). Knight (2000) passionately asserts that educators should prioritize formative strategies of assessment over summative and perhaps even use evidence gathered from formative assessment to serve as the assessment to summarise achievement.

Creating Responsive Learners

Research suggests that to enhance learning, students must be encouraged to actively process the information and feedback received (Chappuis, 2012; ERO, 2012; Hattie and Temperley as cited in Lipnevich et al., 2013). This action, known as 'mindfulness' leads to the greatest gains in performance (Lipnevich et al., 2013). When students receive individual feedback they learn that their teacher wants to help them and are therefore more likely to trust the advice and use it to progress them towards improvement. Black et al. (2004) and ERO (2012) suggest that self-assessment is essential to learning, where students need to know the goal and what is required to achieve it. Teachers need to help students develop this skill, which requires the student to identify how they believe their

understanding is progressing, and justify their judgements with peers (Black et al. 2004). Student-centred learning where students actively construct their own knowledge and skills is increasingly becoming a part of educational pedagogy (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2009). No longer is the teacher the transmitter of all knowledge.

While most of the literature supports the view that feedback is important in creating responsive learners, Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2009) suggest that students who are better at self-regulation produce better internal feedback and are therefore better able to achieve their goals. Similarly, Quinton and Smallbone (2010) emphasise the importance of student reflectivity in order for them to be responsive to the feedback, where structured reflection supports the final stage of knowledge generation (Alton-Lee, 2003). Teachers must help students make connections between the feedback, their work/learning and how to improve. Future research could help to identify the cause and effect relationship between both self-regulation and reflection and feedback. Quinton and Smallbone (2010) also suggest that students' mind-set, either growth or fixed, can influence the effectiveness of the feedback regardless of how effective it was presented.

Enhancing teachers teaching

Literature suggests that assessment for learning is not only important for students but also for enhancing teachers' teaching (Black & William, 2009; Black et al., 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2009; Shute, 2008). The reflexive action of considering and reflecting upon feedback allow consideration of what is happening in the moment and what might happen in the future. This allows one to respond to insights, improve teaching practice and the inclusive nature of the classroom (Carrington & MacArthur, 2012). When used effectively, feedback can be used to modify teaching and learning activities to meet the needs of the students. By students reflecting on their understanding, they provide feedback for the teacher which can indicate where teaching needs to be focused (Black et al. 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2009). When teachers are willing to adapt their lessons based on feedback, this supports the learners and their learning (Black et al. 2004). This supports the Ministry of Education's vision in Tātaiako (2011) to create an environment that represents ako. Additionally Black & William (2009) note that feedback allows teachers to build models of how their students learn and to use this to inform future teaching and feedback processes.

Opposing views

In contrast to the themes in the aforementioned literature, Alton-Lee (2003) and Black & William (2009) say that if we are to look at the findings about particular variables alone, it is not helpful in guiding quality teaching because of the complexity of the relationships of variables in teaching. While a single variable may have a strong relationship with student learning, if teachers increase the amount of a single variable while trying to improve teaching, without paying attention to the learning processes of students', the outcomes could be counterproductive. It is also suggested that too much of any behaviour even if it is positive can be too much and lead to undermining the learning.

Conclusion

This literature review emphasizes that teaching and learning is a reciprocal relationship where feedback is not only important for the learners and their learning but also for the way teaching can cause learning. All authors agreed that effective feedback is integral to teaching and learning. However, it is important to realize that this is part of the kettle of skills and techniques for teaching and learning and there is no single variable that completely informs student learning. The literature encourages teachers to be critically engaged with literature to guide the learning practice as teachers. Teachers must continue to be reflective of their practice in order to improve student learning and classroom practice to cater to the diverse needs of the students. Further studies would be beneficial to understanding the other factors that interact with and contribute to teaching and learning as teachers aspire to be effective teachers and create an ever improving, inclusive learning culture in the classroom.

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